

DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

A monthly magazine devoted to the collecting, preservation and literature of the old-time dime and nickel novels, libraries and popular story papers.

Vol. 22, No. 5

May 15, 1954

Whole No. 260

Early Bicycling Days

By J. H. Ambruster



Mr. J. H. Ambruster and his high wheel "bike" on which he made his famous trip from St. Louis to Denver in 1889

Early Bicycling Days

By J. H. Ambruster

In the early days of bicycling the present style of bicycle was looked upon with disdain by old-style high-wheel riders; they were called "Safeties," or more contemptuously "Goats." Before the regulars, there were tri-cycles, but they were considered children's playtoys, or something in the nature of baby-carriages. There also were two-seated Safeties for use of a boy and his girl, (hence the song, "Daisy, Daisy," etc.) also single-seaters for girls, with curved frame and screen to protect skirts from entangling with chain mechanism. The girls were not yet ready to adopt bloomers nor even short skirts and there were also wire screens over the wheels.

The old style high-wheelers had front wheels four or five feet in diameter, and small rear wheels. These were considered the only kind for a real he-man. Later came the "Star", also high wheel but the small wheel in front; These were considered a novelty and did not last a great while.

There were bicycle clubs, and an afternoon ride with a club, or alone, probably a distance of 15 or 20 miles, with lunch at the other end, was considered a luxury and a treat. Usually there were hills en route, which were reported and named so that most riders were posted in advance. Some near St. Louis were so steep that

some expert riders were unable to negotiate them and if climbed by some one where another had failed, it was quickly announced in the local L.A.W. (League of American Wheelmen) bulletin.

The first practical use of a bike by me was to and from my daily work. This took me to the levee district, with a steep incline to the first retail business street, four blocks above. Few riders could ascend; many did not attempt it, preferring to push the machine upgrade before attempting to mount. After some experience in the big city, I moved to a growing city of some 25,000, about 25 miles distant, making weekend trips back and forth. Mine was the only bike in that place, and of course a curiosity. Some one had owned an old-fashioned, wooden wheel type, in times past. Soon a number of youths made my acquaintance, and one came forth with a bright suggestion that we start a bicycle club, and would I join? "I guess so," I said, "but where are your wheels?" "Oh, you have one," was the reply, "and we can take turns riding it." Of course, this did not appeal to me. To show how different things were in those days: Only one telephone in town, (L. D. to St. Louis); no automobiles, no paved roads, no movies, no radios, no airplanes,

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no television; and many other ordinary conveniences were lacking. Usually a road was considered a good one when known as a "Rock Road," covered with cobblestones allowed to be crushed to fine dust by constant use of heavy team loads. Footpaths on the side were used for such bicycle travel as existed.

After a year or two I moved to Colorado by train—a freight train at that, six days ride to Colorado. I had the job of "escorting" a newly made private car to a Colorado railroad executive who was building a new road, but that is another story. Later, back to St. Louis, but there had been so many changes, new buildings everywhere, and old-time youthful friends disappeared, that I soon yearned to get back west where friends had been made and the environment enjoyed. A second-hand bike was bought and a start made by wheel, alone. No auto road maps in those days; I concluded that I could find the way simply by closely following railroad lines and rivers. No daily weather reports either, by radio or otherwise; no electric lights, except here and there, something still new. First day out 54 miles to Union, Mo., one of the toughest and roughest parts of the whole journey. Here the first night was spent, and it seemed like the whole town wanted to inspect this new fangled travel invention. Then some one suggested a race around the Courthouse Square with a horse; this was done, with the bike winning. Not a fair race however, as both horse and bike had to slow up at the four corners, and the skittish horse did not want to get too near his crazy competitor.

Several days thereafter the route continued through wild, sparsely inhabited territory, about halfway between the Missouri River and the nearest railroad, about five or six miles apart, and when a person occasionally showed up it seemed that he or she had never before heard of such a thing as a bicycle. One colored woman walking toward me, stopped in her tracks dumbfounded. I dismounted to reassure her, and as she timidly came up to me she said, "Mis-

ter, is that what you calls a Flying Trapeze?" Whenever a farmer and his team approached, there would be a furore; horses standing on their hind legs or trying to turn aside to get away from the contraption, and driver equally excited and scarcely able to control his animals. In such cases I would dismount, wheel to one side into brush and let man and beast calm down or continue persistent efforts to pass by the wonderful yet dangerous contraption, as it was called on more than one occasion.

At one place an overnight stop was made at a small village. The only hotel boasted of three or four guest rooms; nevertheless, by comparison, it was considered the equal of the Waldorf-Astoria in that hidden backwoods place. I suggested that the bike be placed in the barn for the night, but mine host would not tolerate anything like that for such an honored guest. The bike was to be taken to the "Bridal Chamber" along with its owner; nothing was too good for such unusual company; besides, if left in the barn some accident might occur; in the room with its master it would be much safer and nothing could happen there to this wonderful machine.

Toward the end of Missouri it started to rain, and rain it did almost daily to Colorado, making traveling so difficult that it required 26 days to make the entire trip. No effort was made to establish a record or to make fast time; simply a pleasure trip in the usual sense, and that's what it turned out to be. When nearing Kansas City, somewhere between there and Independence, (Ex-President Truman's bailiwick) a farm house was passed where several persons were seated on the porch. No stop was made, simply a wave of the hand and astonished looks on the faces of the family. A short distance beyond, probably a thousand yards, a sudden storm arose and a heavy rain commenced. Quickly I leaned the bike against a wire fence and made a hasty retreat to the farm house for shelter. No one on the porch, the door was tried when a yell was heard; "Don't go in there! stay out of there!

come here!" Not knowing whence the call came, a run was made to the barn; again the voice: "Stay out of there, it's dangerous". Confused and excited, next available place seemed to be a henhouse; to that I ran and started to crawl in; again the voice, "Not there, come here." But where was "here"? Seeing no other sign of life or likely shelter I remained among the chickens until the storm subsided. Finally the family made its appearance from an underground "Cyclone Cellar," where they had been safely ensconced in their most reliable shelter in emergencies of this kind. They told me that the henhouse was the worst place I could have selected, that a big blow might have taken the hen house first, possibly their dwelling next, and landed both buildings along with hens and myself, in the next County, as often happens. "We take no chances," said the farmer, "as soon as a blow comes we make for the cellar; that's what it's for."

But I came out second best at that. As soon as normalcy was restored I bid the folks adieu, to continue my journey, but lo and behold! a stroke of lightning had struck the wire fence, transferred to the leaning wheel and cracked the side-supporting frame of the small wheel. This put the bike out of use, having made mire out of the clay road, making it impossible to continue even had the bike not been damaged. Back to the farmer for advice; I was directed across a portion of his field, pushing the bike of course, then through a neighbor's field, and so on, to a hard stone road which would lead to Kansas City, a distance of three or four miles to its outskirts. Without much trouble a repair shop was found, the damage corrected, and a hasty start made to Lawrence and Topeka, capital of Kansas, and on to Denver, some 650 miles most of which was without a tree in sight except for some scrawny oaks or similar, along streams, also scarce. This plus some 300 miles so far traveled, also some detours or retracings, made approximately 1000 miles total.

There were many interesting, amusing and exciting incidents in Missouri and beyond, but came with such regularity that they were largely taken for granted, yet many of them out-of-the-ordinary kind.

Groups of astonished, amazed and amused onlookers were typical everywhere en route, except in the larger cities. Many were ready with questions, some prompted by a small metal flag attached to handlebar, one side reading: "Across the Plains from St. Louis to Denver," and the reverse, "Pike's Peak or Bust!", the latter being a former travel slogan of some of the covered wagon folks. The younger folks especially were quick with questions, such as: "How far is Denver?", "How far did you come from St. Louis?", "Are there many of those things in 'St. Louis?'", "When will you get to Denver?", "Are you going to the top of Pike's Peak with that," and others at every stop. Incidentally, the longest day's ride was 77 miles; not bad when taking into account difficult roads and ever recurring rising grades. Must have been a nice sunny day at that.

At Topeka, as in Kansas City, a bicycle was no novelty, but the new arrival was soon spotted by local cyclists and taken in hand to be shown the high-lights of the city. And this was typical of any stopping place, especially one large enough to warrant a place on a map and have the distinction of being well-known by name at any rate. Always a proud native at hand to get in a boost for his home town and some special feature worthy of praise. At one point such elaboration went to the state at large. For many years Kansas was a Prohibition or Bone Dry State—long before the 18th Amendment. (I do not know its present status). Said one of the Goodwill Expounders: "I'm proud of my State and this action, even if I don't exactly approve of it". This was "straddling the fence" with a vengeance. "But," said he, "in some places they have it fixed to suit everybody anyway. This is how they do it: You know according to law no

one can sell intoxicating drink except druggists, and they for medicinal use only. Now some druggists, I won't say all of them, have a convenient little booth with shelves, on which are certain bottles carefully labeled 'For medical use only'. That's for the use of some snooping investigator who might happen along. Now a man 'in the know' goes to a store, ignores the proprietor and sales people, (of course they don't see him either); he goes to the booth, helps himself to whatever he wants, leaves the change in a convenient place, and departs. You see how it works, The druggist hasn't sold him anything, the customer hasn't bought anything, but both are well pleased."

One night a stop was made at a Kansas farm house; the farmer arranged for meals and lodging, but how to take care of that other critter floored him. He led the way to the barn, which housed numerous livestock, and cleaned out an unused stall to make room for the bike. However, he was not satisfied and worried over the safety of that critter. After I had gone to bed the farmer made another trip to the barn to see how the bike was getting along. Lest the machine would start of its own accord during the night, he fastened it securely with a heavy halter rope and took special precaution to fasten the barn door, muttering to himself, "I guess that'll keep you from meandering around the place when no one is watching, or maybe take a nip or two at some of my stock."

And so the next morning the bike was found, safe and sound, just where it had been carefully secured. The farmer explained that he had taken special pains to see that it could not escape or in any way damage his stock or crops during the night. When I left that place the whole family was out to see the wonderful contraption take off. And needless to say, the farmer heaved a heavy sigh of relief as it left his place.

Onward, westward to Manhattan, Kans., Junction City, Fort Riley, Salina, Ellsworth, Ellis, Limon, Denver

and many smaller villages each with its own interesting tale to tell. Always up and down hills, each succeeding one a little higher than the preceding one, with majestic Pike's Peak soon looming up in the far distant sky. And many obstacles: rivers to cross; at small creeks with no assistance in sight, wade through, pushing bike; at larger rivers, frequently hand ferry propelled by continual pulling on long rope stretched from shore to shore; if no ferry, then resort to railroad right of way by climbing embankment, looking carefully east and west, to spy any train on single track line, then hastily pushing bike across bridge and down the other side of river. Risky and treacherous, but what else was to be done? In some cases where roads were bad, resorted to foot path alongside right of way, but this was slow, as frequent stops for ditches and other obstructions were necessary.

Before leaving St. Louis, I had provided myself with a small revolver; not for fear of Indians or bandits, which had not been given a thought, and Jesse James was dead and his band dispersed, but more for fear of wild animals. Also a water canteen for use in crossing desert country. Had light blanket attached to bike for use if and when necessary to sleep in the open; not necessary, but there was the ever-present snow fence beyond K. C., erected by the railroad for winter use, often left standing during the summer.

(to be continued)

The next issue of the Roundup will contain a Biography of Charles Asbury Stephens, by Kenneth Daggett.

MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

- 106 Roy E. Swanstrom, 617½ East Maryland Ave., St. Paul, Minn. (New Add.)
- 205 C. H. Camille Whitehead, 160 Leonard St., Fall River, Mass. (New member)
- 72 L. D. Webster, RFD #1 Box 36, Lake Worth, Florida (New ad.)

NEWSY NEWS

by Ralph F. Cummings

Bob Frye has been sick, but is much better now.

No word from Harry St. Clair as yet, am wondering if he is still in the hospital, or at home, as I haven't received any word, has anyone heard?

Nor have I heard from Jim Martin out in California, either.

Just heard from Mrs. Shear that her husband, John L. Shear, Smith's Basin, N. Y., and a member a few years ago, died March 29th, 1953. I have just heard from his dear wife, and she says that John always enjoyed getting mail from other members, and had lots of pleasant contacts with them, too. God Bless him always, no matter where he may be.

Also George H. Hess of St. Paul, Minn., passed away, just what date I don't know, but since I heard from him Feb. 25th and now. George has been one swell fellow to us all, and we'll all miss him too. Eli Messier gave me the bad news last Tuesday, April 6th and since then others have written me, as well as hearing from his bank of business myself. George has been a member of our little brotherhood since January 1938, and has been an ardent member as well as a collector of old dime and nickel novels of all kinds, story papers, weeklies, libraries, etc., both American and English Bloods and Dreadfuls. George had a collection of 30,000 volumes in May 1946, so you can imagine what a collection he had now, for that was his enjoyment, collecting and reading. George was 73 in 1946 so that would make him 81 in July, 1954, so you see, he wasn't quite 81 years old, a ripe old age, and he enjoyed every bit of it. When George was a youngster he pedaled daily papers, out in Omaha, Nebr., and used to divide his papers at the firehouse, and one day he picked up a novel after the firemen had read it, and started to read it himself, so from then on he's been a dime novel fan. He had a fine writeup in the magazine supplement of the St. Paul Sun-

day Pioneer Express, May 5, 1946, with a picture of him on the front cover, putting a book way up on top of a pile of old timers. The pictures inside, of George, one exercising, and one lying on the couch, enjoying reading a Wide Awake Library. On page two a nice spread of novels of all kinds, while another was No. 1 of Beadle's Dime Novels. Mrs. Ann S. Stephens "Malaeka, the Indian Wife of the White Hunter." Yes, and he had 30,000 in 1946, so no doubt he had nearly 50,000 when he passed away, and what a collection it was. So again I say, we'll miss him terribly. I know the good Lord will take care of him, no matter where he is, so God bless him always.

WANTED

Pluck and Luck #342, Wide Awake Weekly #13 28 30 Blue and Gray #30.

FOR SALE

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tic, Ellis, Braden, Dudley in cloth bounds, Tip Tops, I need Clif Sterling cloth bounds, McKay, J. R. Schorr, 11572 S. Cypress St., Orange, California.

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Cummings, Fisherville, Mass.

Any one having old U. S. stamps write to Carl Linville, 972 Windsor St., Cincinnati 6, Ohio.

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Wanted—Vol. 7 of Beadles Saturday Journal, Clyde Wakefield, 11 Lorange St., Worcester 3, Mass.

For exchange for "The Popular Magazine". 33 Jules Vernes in Seaside and Lakeside Libraries, Argosy 1904, Blue Book 1913-30 Short Stories, Frontier, Famous Story, Golden Book. W. E. Bennett, 2305 Indiana, Kansas City, Mo.

Wanted—Paolina; or The Sybil of the Arnopy by M. A. Cleagh Pub. by Gleason, 1849. Mrs. S. T. Hoyt, 1970 Ualakaa St., Honolulu, T. H.

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Tony The Hero, Ogilvie, 1880

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(Above are cloth-bound books. Must be first editions.)

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Ralph F. Cummings

Fisherville, Mass.